

Collaborative learning in English for specific purposes (ESP) courses: Effectiveness and students' attitudes towards it

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Key words

Collaborative learning, group work, English for Specific Purposes, workplace, higher education, Lebanon.

Abstract

The effectiveness of collaborative learning (CL) on students' learning and their classroom interaction as well as on preparing students for the workplace has been stressed in a lot of the literature (Saba 'Ayon, 2013a; Gillies, 2008; Ghaith, 2003; Abram et al., 2002; King, 2000; Johnson, et al., 1995; Shachar and Sharan, 1994; and Johnson and Johnson, 1986 among others) and (Beckman, 1990; Musa, at al., 2011) respectively. Due to these benefits, the researcher incorporates CL in her teaching strategies in two advanced ESP courses at a private Lebanese English-speaking university. However, quite a number of her students are reluctant to work collaboratively and express their preferences to her to work individually. Therefore, the researcher aims in this research study to examine (1) students' attitudes towards working collaboratively and (2) students' perceptions of the effectiveness of CL on (a) their learning as well as (b) their acquisition of essential skills required in the workplace such as problem-solving, teamwork, flexibility, and tolerance. The researcher employs a mixed method approach and uses different data-collection methods. The findings, which are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, reveal that most participants have a positive attitude towards CL. However, past negative experiences with CL, poor group dynamics, and absence of instructor's support contribute to students' negative disposition towards CL. Besides, the participants perceive CL as having a positive impact on their learning and their acquisition of job-related skills. Appropriate recommendations are suggested to increase the effectiveness of collaborative learning in these courses and enhance students' attitudes towards it.

Introduction

In this paper, the researcher reports on her second research, investigating her students' attitudes towards collaborative learning (CL) and their perceptions of its effectiveness on their learning as well as on their acquisition of job-related skills. As the sample of her first study was relatively small, the researcher accumulated data from her classes over two semesters to get further insights into her students' attitudes and their perceptions of the effectiveness of CL on their learning as well as on preparing them for the workplace.

A lot of researchers (Johnson and Johnson, 1996; Wang and Burton, 2010; Gokhale, 1995; Brown, n.d.; Bonwell and Eison, 1991 among others) have defined collaborative learning. All have stressed the idea of students learning together in small groups. Similar to the aforementioned researchers, the researcher defines it "as a pedagogical practice in which students work together in small groups of two or more to complete a common task within the class session or outside the classroom for a certain period of time ranging between two weeks

and a month depending on the complexity and the scope of the task" (Saba 'Ayon, 2013b, p. 3). Like Gokhale (1995), Johnson and Johnson (1996), and Wang and Burton (2010) among others, the researcher aims to maximize students' learning when having them work in groups. Unlike Gokhale (1995), the researcher does not always select groups on the basis of students' performance; different selection criteria are used: either heterogeneous or homogenous, through self-selection or random assignment depending on her objective and the assigned task (see Saba 'Ayon, 2013a, p. 3 for further information on group selection).

1.1 Problem and rationale

The effectiveness of collaborative learning (CL), as a pedagogical practice, on students' learning and their classroom interaction as well as on preparing students for the workplace has been stressed in the literature (Saba 'Ayon, 2013a; Gillies, 2008; Ghaith, 2003; Abram et al., 2002; King, 2000; Johnson, et al., 1995; Shachar and Sharan, 1994; and Johnson & Johnson, 1986 among others) and (Beckman, 1990; Musa, et al., 2011) respectively. To this end, the researcher implements this teaching approach in two advanced English ESP courses, namely *Business Communication Skills* and *Technical Writing*, at a private Lebanese English-speaking university. However, quite a number of her students express their reluctance to work collaboratively and their preference to complete the work individually. Because there is not much empirical research investigating university or college students' attitudes to CL and its effectiveness on their learning and because such research seems to be absent in the Lebanese context (at least to the researcher's knowledge), the author aims to investigate (1) students' attitudes towards working collaboratively, and (2) students' perceptions of CL effectiveness on (a) their learning as well as (b) their acquisition of essential job-related skills.

1.2 Context

The study reported in this paper takes place in two advanced ESP courses at a Lebanese private English-speaking university. The main aim of these courses, each of which is 3-credits taught over a semester, is to prepare students to be professional communicators and team players in their workplace environments. To this end, the author, through the use of CL, helps students to acquire skills that are essential in their prospective workplace such as problem-solving skills, the ability to meet deadlines, negotiation skills, tolerance, critical thinking, social skills, and oral as well as writing skills among others. These courses are prerequisite for the students' internship training as well as for their senior projects. Students in these courses, who are advanced English learners (Minimum TOEFL grade is 560), are of different majors: business, engineering, graphic design, and communication and science information system.

2. Research questions

The following three questions guided this research study:

1. What is the attitude of the students towards working collaboratively with their peers in their ESP course?
2. How do these students perceive the impact of CL on their learning?
3. How do these students perceive the influence of CL on their acquisition of job-related skills?

3. Literature review

This section is divided into three sub-sections, the first of which reviews some of the literature on university students' attitudes towards collaborative learning. The second section depicts some research studies on the benefits of CL on students' learning, and the last reviews other studies discussing the importance of CL in preparing students for the workplace.

3.1 Attitudes of students towards CL

Students' attitudes towards CL are very critical to successful collaborative learning. Thus, they were the subject of investigation in numerous recent research studies. For example, Ku, et al. (2013), who examined the attitudes of 197 graduate students over three years towards online collaborative learning, found that the surveyed students "favored working collaboratively in an online environment" (p. 928). The majority of these participants believed that collaborative environment resulted in better learning. The researchers found that three factors, namely team dynamics, team acquaintance, and instructor's support, contributed positively to the students' satisfaction with CL. Similarly, Bartle, et al. (2011), who investigated the attitudes of university science students towards group activities and their impact on the students' personal and educational development, found that their participants have very positive attitudes towards collaborative learning activities. In addition, students' open-ended written responses reveal that students, who are aware of the importance of developing strong interpersonal skills, felt that such group activities help them develop these skills (p. 310). Unlike other research such as Ku, et al. (2013), Bartle et al., (2011) did not find the degree of familiarity of the group members to impact the performance of the groups or the successful completion of the task. In another quantitative study, Choi and Ro (2012) investigated the factors that impact the attitudes of university Hospitality Management students towards group projects. 379 participants of different academic statuses, ethnic background, and genders were surveyed. The findings reveal that students' perceptions of the project appropriateness, instructor's support, and fair evaluation led to students' positive attitudes towards group projects. In other words, "the more often students had group projects that were well suited for the course, were supported by the instructor during the whole project process, and had fair evaluation methods, the more positive attitudes they had toward group projects" (p. 307). In addition, team problems resulted in students' developing negative attitudes towards group work. In other words, "students who have had more team problems from previous group projects showed less favorable attitudes towards group projects" (p. 307). The importance of this study lies in highlighting the instructor's role in helping students experience successful group projects and hence developing positive attitudes towards such projects.

3.2 Benefits of CL on students' learning

The benefits of CL on students' learning have extensively been discussed in the literature. The most important of these benefits are: (1) promoting higher-order thinking (Johnson and Johnson, 1986; Ingleton, et al., 2000; Kreijns, et al., 2003; and Totten, et al., 1999; Abram, et al., 2002, King, 2002), (2) fostering critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995; Totten, et al., 1999; Kreijns et al., 2003), (3) gaining problem-solving skills (Gokhale, 1995; Brown, n.d.; Ingleton, et al., 2000), (4) enhancing academic achievement (Ghaith, 2003; Brown, n.d.; Cabrera,

et al., 2002; Armstrong, 2010), (5) increasing learning retention (Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Brown, n.d., Armstrong, 2010; Bartle, et al., 2011), (6) developing social and communication skills (Brown, n.d.; Shachar and haran, 1994; Rutherford, et al., 1998; Kreijns, et al., 2003; Bartle, et al., 2011), (7) improving EFL learners' fluency (Khabiri and Lavasani, 2012), and (8) increasing students' interest and involvement in learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Shachar and Sharan, 1994; Ingleton, et al., 2000; Bartle, et al., 2011; Ku, et al., 2013 among others) (see Saba 'Ayon, 2013a for more elaborate discussion on the benefits of CL).

3.2 Importance of CL in preparing students for the workplace

Besides the benefits of CL on students' learning, CL prepares students for the workplace as it (1) helps them "to deal increasingly with complex workplace problems and processes ..." (Beckman, 1990, p. 128), (2) "facilitates the transference and inculcation of workplace related skills among the subjects [participants] ...such as team working, managing conflicts, decision making, and communication skills" (Musa, Mufti, Abdul Latiff, and Mohamed Amin, 2011, p. 194), and (3) helps students become "more independent, confident, and productive in generating and discussing ideas" (Musa, et al., 2011, p. 194; Khabiri & Lavasani, 2012; and Totten, et al., 1999). Due to these advantages, CL becomes so essential that Brown (n.d., p.2) maintains "In a world where being a 'team player' is often linked with business success, CL is a very useful and relevant tool", and that Ingleton et al. (2000, p.9) conclude that CL prepares "students in any discipline for the world of work" (see Saba 'Ayon, 2013a for more elaborate discussion on this idea). In short, CL can play a very essential role in improving students' learning and in preparing graduates to meet the expectations of employers in the workplace.

4. Methodology and methods

The researcher's methodological stance is that of a pragmatist, who emphasizes "the research problem and use[s] all approaches available to understand the problem" (Creswell, 2009, p.10). That is why the researcher uses a mixed methods design, which involves the use of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. As the problems addressed by social science researchers are usually complex, the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods "provides an expanded understanding of research problems" (Creswell, 2009, p. 203). Of the different types of mixed methods procedures, the researcher employs the concurrent design whereby both quantitative and qualitative data collection are happening at the same time of the research study, and the findings of the two databases are compared "side by side in a discussion" (Creswell, 2009, p. 213) (see figure 1 below).

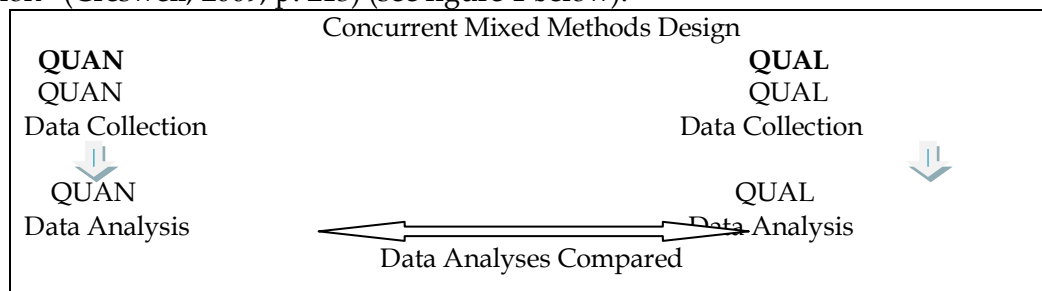


Figure 1 Concurrent Design (Adapted from Creswell, 2009, p.210)

4.1 Participants

Sixty-nine participants, who were promised confidentiality, anonymity, and non-traceability, were purposively sampled from previous students who took either of the two ESP courses, Business Communication skills and Technical Writing. These participants are advanced English learners (Minimum TOEFL grade is 560). All of these participants, who were of both genders (38 females and 31 males), completed the self-completion questionnaire. These participants were of different majors (31 business, 36 engineering, and only 1 Communication and Science Information System (CSIS)). The participants were also of different statuses: 14 graduates, 31 seniors, 20 juniors, and 4 sophomores.

4.2 Data collection methods

The researcher employed quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments: a self-completion questionnaire, 3 focus groups of 20 participants in total and 3 semi-structured telephone interviews with graduates, each of which lasted 20-25 minutes. The researcher validated the transcriptions with the participants via e-mail.

4.3. Analysis

The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The researcher analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS file to determine the frequencies of each item on the questionnaire. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed. Then the researcher compared the conclusions derived from the different analyses of the multi-sourced data.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings, which confirmed a lot of the findings in the earlier research (Saba 'Ayon, 2013a), are presented in terms of the themes derived from analyzing the data.

5.1 Attitudes towards CL

Based on the collected data (questionnaire, focus group, telephone semi-structured), the participants, who had a positive experience in their ESP course, have a very positive attitude towards CL. In fact, in the questionnaire most of the participants rated their experience in either of the two courses between excellent, very good and good (92.8%) (See figure 2 below).

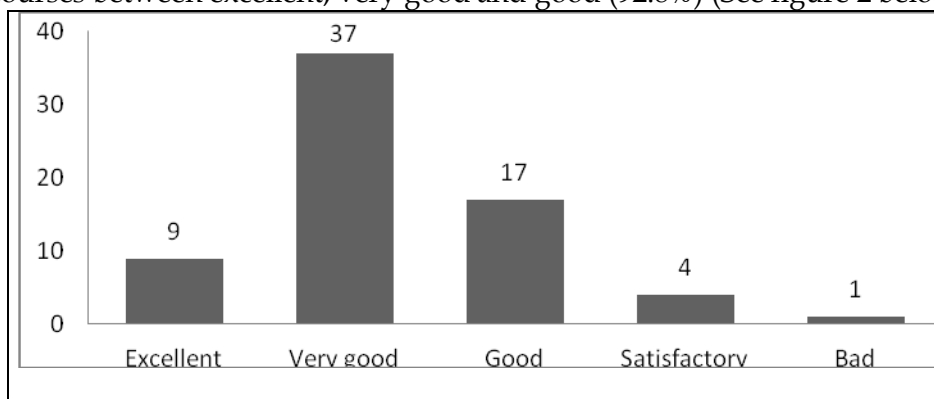


Figure2: Experiences of the participants in the ESP course

In the questionnaire the respondents also described their experience using collaborative learning as helpful (69.6%), enjoyable (36.2%), challenging (26.1%), unhelpful (4.3%), wasteful (1.4%), others (5.8%) (See table 1 below). In other words, most participants perceived CL as a helpful and enjoyable pedagogical practice. Even those who selected the “others” category justified their opinions by rating their experience as “fun and interesting”. Similarly, in the focus group, all the respondents agreed that their experience was positive; they described it as “interesting”, “beneficial”, and “fun” yet “challenging”.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Helpful	48	69.6
Enjoyable	25	36.2
Challenging	18	26.1
Wasteful	1	1.4
unhelpful	3	4.3
Others	4	5.8

Table 1: Participants’ experiences with CL

The data derived from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire, the focus groups, and the telephone interviews helped to get deeper understanding of the respondents’ attitudes. Most of the participants described their experiences with CL as helpful for several factors, most prevalent of which are (1) positive interdependence among the group members; “we could depend greatly on each other and do the job more easily”; “sharing and exchanging ideas”, (2) preparation for the work place; “we could learn how to handle such situations in our future careers”, (3) gaining team player and communication skills; “it increased our communication skills and how to behave within teams;” “... it helps to accept others and be patient concerning future job”, and (4) improved achievement “honestly, I prefer to work with my classmates, better efficiency and better grades”; another wrote, “we were able to perform each assignment given, hand it on time, and achieved good grades”.

As in the earlier research (Saba ‘Ayon, 2013a), “challenging” was used to indicate both a positive as well as a negative meaning. Some participants indicated that their experience was a challenging one in a positive sense as reflected in what they reported, (1) developing a team spirit, “to do your best for the best of the team”; another wrote “we were able to accomplish what we were asked to do within a team spirit”, (2) acquiring group dynamics skills “selecting the right members and making the whole work coherent and unified”, (3) helping others to reach their ultimate potential (Vygotsk’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development), “working with a weaker member and encouraging, even forcing him to cooperate with me to achieve best work results”; another reported, “we had to work on each other weaknesses”, (4) developing social relationships with team members, “at first we had boundaries between our classmates of a different field; we didn’t want to interact with them because we didn’t know them. At the end of the semester, these boundaries were broken. Now, everyone knows and talks with everyone in the class”, (5) learning how to meet deadlines, “it was challenging but enjoyable because we had to meet deadlines”.

To other respondents, “challenging” indicated a negative connotation such as (1) personal conflicts within the group members, “my partner never replied to my e-mails and refused even to answer my phone calls”, (2) lack of commitment from team members “claiming

that they don't have time", which results in "lousy work by other members", (3) dependency on one member especially in the case of friends, "we are expected to carry their share and understand; otherwise, our friendship will be affected", (4) finding common time to meet, "it was challenging since we had a difficulty in managing our time to meet and work with each other"; another participant said "having different schedules makes it impossible to meet", and (5) competing with other groups, "it was challenging between each groups who wrote better and got higher grades". One participant in the questionnaire described her experience as wasteful because as she stated, "First, I didn't know anyone in the group before and second I was blamed for the mistakes we had in our report despite all the effort I exerted".

A few rated their experience as unhelpful. One explained his attitude by blaming his group members for not being cooperative enough to accomplish the report, "I had a bad group [thus]our feasibility was a disaster, whereas it [his CL experience] was helpful and enjoyable when it came to writing the e-mail, memo, and letter", as in-class activities. Despite his negative experience with his group members in the outside class task, this same participant expressed in one focus group his preference to work collaboratively, "I still prefer to work in groups despite my bad experience once". Those who selected the "others" category explained that CL was very productive due to the members' combined efforts; "after all we can't be perfect in everything, so we helped each other and my group was really working with me". One participant wrote "it depends"; she explained her attitude by linking it to the instructor's support and monitoring. In other words, the more support and monitoring of the group work by the instructor, the more positive attitude she has to CL and vice versa. Such an attitude was evident in her comment, "Your class is an exception; you deal very professionally: support and monitor our work; however, majority of students are trained by unprofessional teachers, who don't expect students to work professionally and don't provide support ... If I have people like my partner in your class, I would enjoy working collaboratively with them".

Overall, the participants have a positive attitude towards CL. Despite this positive attitude, 23.4% of the participants have reservations towards working collaboratively. This reservation could be related to multiple factors: (1) the commitment and cooperativeness of the group members; "CL is helpful when they [group members] are really responsible and care to make a difference ... for the group's overall benefit", (2) the support and monitoring of the instructor; "Honestly, in other courses, I used to do all the work, which I hate. However, the work plan and your follow up were very helpful, dividing tasks among each other", and (3) the disharmony between the nature of collaborative learning adopted in these ESP courses and the competitive nature of the rewarding/grading system followed at the university, for students especially high achieving usually compete to score the highest averages in their schools to be recognized and financially rewarded.

5.2 Students' perceptions of the impact of CL on students' learning

Only 8.7% of the participants indicated that their grades regressed. The others (58%) believed that their grades or course achievement improved and 27 % selected "no change" category (See figure 3 below). However, all the participants during the focus groups believed

that working together helped them learn from each other and produce better written assignments and hence better grades.

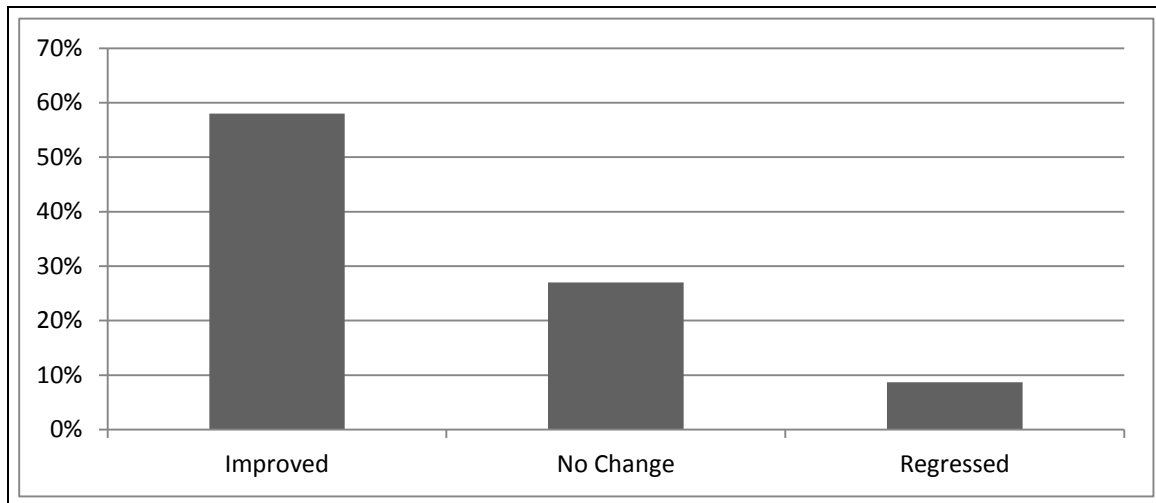


Figure 3 Participants' perceptions of the impact of CL on their achievement (grades)

Deeper analysis of the data collected from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the focus group could provide deeper understanding of the participants' answers. Those who selected the "no change" category were those students who were high achieving students and who worked with partners who were likewise or maybe who were pushed to work as hard. That is why their grades were not affected; they retained almost the same grades. However, those who indicated regression of their grades had a different explanation. One blamed the instructor for selecting his group members, who turned to be not cooperative enough.

Thus, he ended up "do[ing] most of the work which was exhausting. In the final presentation, I did well, but they performed very poorly". Another participant in the focus group complained about her partners' dependency on her to do all the work, "This might regress my work". Another explained that "although our group did very well, better products [grades] are dependent on how to do the work. If partners don't do their work properly, then it puts us behind". In other words, the improvement of their grades was dependent on the other group members and the quality of their work.

5.3 Students' perceptions of the impact of CL on their learning process

A lot of the participants (72.5%) indicated that CL facilitated the learning and teaching process in their course. However, only 10.1% indicated that it slowed their learning and 11.6% selected "no impact" category (See figure 4 below).

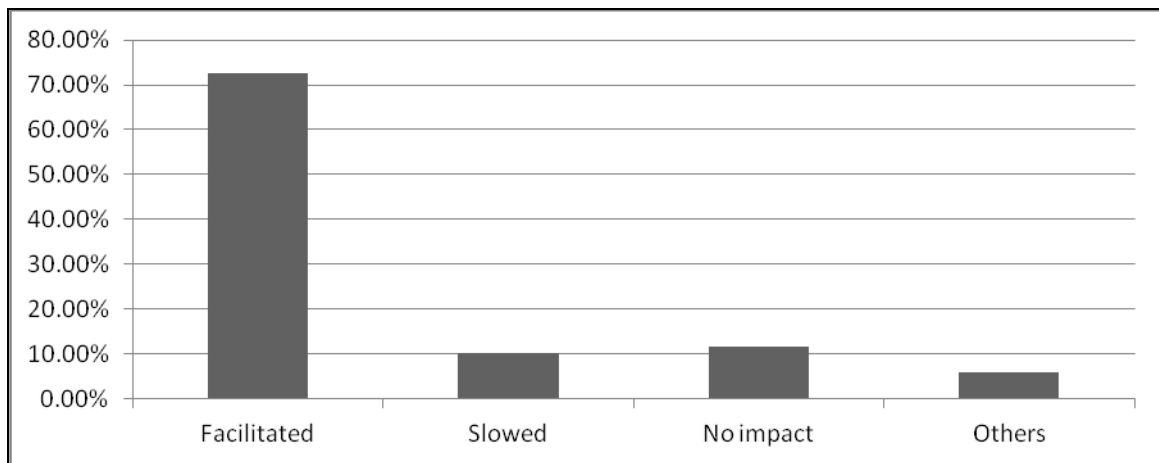


Figure 4 Impact of CL on learning/teaching process

The qualitative data were consistent with the quantitative. Through CL, participants believed that they were able to learn better and complement each others' strengths and weaknesses as reflected in their responses. One participant wrote, "It [CL] helped me catch up with others and be productive", and another reported, "It helped us learn from each other and made the work easier". Further analysis of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire showed that those selecting "hindered/slowed" category seem to be the ones who had problems with their group members, who reported that their members did not show enough commitment to the project and did not cooperate enough with them. One participant who selected the slowed category also wrote that CL facilitated his work with other members in class but not outside class while working with other members on their project.

This is probably due to the absence of the instructor's support or monitoring during the activities performed outside the classroom. Even one of those who reported positively on CL experiences and who were in favor of working collaboratively (as shown in his answers on the questionnaire) selected "no impact" category. Probably, that participant might not have understood this particular question, which is one of the limitations of the questionnaire. Those who selected the "others" category wrote that "CL was very challenging yet facilitated my work", and another participant explained that CL can facilitate the process "if members are of the same level, major, and are not friends but classmates".

The impact of CL on the learning/teaching process was also translated in terms of fun and enjoyment in the class atmosphere; one graduate stated "the class atmosphere was very nice: funny sometimes and serious, hard work other times". Thus, students seem to perceive that CL facilitates their learning process as long as their team members are cooperative and committed enough to their learning as well as the learning of other group members.

5.4 Impact of CL on helping students acquire job-related skills

The participants in the questionnaire indicated that CL helped them develop different job-related skills. The table below provides more specific details about the participants' responses on the questionnaire.

Team Player	Flexibility	Tolerance	Problem-solving	Communication
82.6%	85%	79.7%	78.2%	60.3%

Table 2 Impact of CL on helping students acquire job-related skills

In depth analysis of open-ended questions, focus groups and telephone interviews confirmed the participants' perceptions on the questionnaire. One graduate participant wrote, "The course was a great experience for me, in which I learnt a lot of communication and technical skills that I still use today and everyday in my job". Another graduate said "learning how to work in teams in our course made the job easier as all the work is done in teams". One graduate wrote "CL in this course has improved my interpersonal skills, in addition to respecting different opinions and trying to find solutions that are suitable for every group member". Another respondent who had a part-time job when she was taking the course said, "I was actually applying in my work what I was taking in the class". Another graduate wrote, "It's a great preparation for a productive career". Similarly, one participant in the focus group commented on the beneficial skills she gained from working collaboratively in the course to the extent that she is "applying the same strategy she learned in other courses".

Other participants in the focus group talked about gaining flexibility in finding time to meet with their group members and developing tolerance. They also learned how to solve problems. For example, one said, "When we did not find common free time to meet, we solved it by having each two partners meet and communicate with each other via whatsapp, e-mail, and viber".

6. Conclusion

The majority of the participants have a positive attitude toward CL. However, past negative experiences with group work, poor group dynamics, and absence or little instructor's support and monitoring contribute to some students' unfavorable disposition towards CL. In other words, students regard CL as helpful as long as their group members are accountable and dependable to complete their learning task with- which is in line with Slavin's (1988) individual accountability and positive interdependence among the group members- and as long as the instructor maintain good monitoring of the group progress. Besides, the disharmony between the nature of collaborative learning adopted in these ESP courses and the competitive nature of the rewarding/grading system followed at the university seem to impact on students' acceptance of collaborative activities and spirit.

Students perceive CL as having a positive impact on their learning. Their grade achievement, their written and oral work, and their learning process are positively influenced by their collaborative experiences. In addition, students also believe that CL helps them develop job-related skills, namely team player, flexibility, tolerance, problem-solving and communication skills.

The researcher cannot claim generalization of the findings; however, the researcher asserts that the findings of this research study are both trustworthy and authentic. By comparing the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaire, the researcher ensured credibility of the findings. Being reflexive helped to a certain extent to avoid having the researcher's personal values or biases "sway the conduct of my research" and the findings (Bryman, 2008, p. 379). In the presentation of the findings, the researcher tried to retain the voices of her participants by presenting substantive quotes said by them.

6.1 Further research

As this research was done on a small, non-probability sample not representing all the students who take these ESP courses, further research is recommended to get more insights about students' attitudes towards CL and the impact of this strategy on their learning as well as on their acquisition of job-related skills. Also, it will be quite interesting to investigate the role of gender, major, and/or status on students' attitudes towards CL, their perceptions of their learning and their preparation to the workplace. As Bacon (2011) differentiated between students' perceptions of the impact of teamwork and the actual impact through direct measures on students' learning, the researcher suggests future research to examine the impact of CL on students' learning through direct measures.

7. Implication

Based on the above conclusions, the researcher recommends the following to increase the effectiveness of CL in these courses and enhance students' attitudes towards it.

1. Help students to get to know each other early in the semester and to develop social skills.
2. Familiarize students with the instructor's expectations of them when they are asked to perform tasks collaboratively.
3. Train students on how to collaborate with each other and how to give feedback on each other's work.
4. Allow students to select their group members rather than impose certain grouping arrangements on them.
5. Encourage them to form their teams of non-friends as this is likely to reduce the obligation of carrying a friend's share.
6. Ensure individual accountability within each group by having them divide the tasks among the group members and indicate these tasks on their prepared work plan.
7. More follow up from the instructor as well as the team members on each team progress through group conferencing, evaluating members through individual tests, students' reporting their progress on their projects regularly, and students' evaluating each others' contribution to their groups.
8. Encourage students to use alternative ways to communicate and not rely only on face-to-face meeting.
9. Conduct a workshop at the university to familiarize other instructors with the challenges of group work and ways to overcome these challenges to ensure successful group work
10. Encourage other instructors who do not implement this pedagogical approach in their courses to use CL due to its multi benefits on students' learning and their preparation for the workplace.

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